



CRAIG HICKMAN 2016-02-25

SUBTRACTION THEORY: THE FUTURE OF CAPITALISM

ECONOFICTION, LEXICON,
PHILOFICTION

ACCELERATION, BARBARISM, CAPITAL, CAPITALISM, NON-FUTURE,
SUBTRACTION

Over on *The Real Movement* blog Jehu has a timely post that carefully evaluates the so-called post-capitalist notion as erroneous. He begins with the worn and obvious quote by Žižek ironizing the notion that *"it's much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism."* As Jehu says, "I have been reading a lot of writers who are trying to prove Žižek wrong by imagining a society that might be loosely categorized as post-capitalism — a term I personally detest." Read his post: [here](#).

Marx in the *Grundrisse* sees the future of capitalism as the End of History, or as he termed it the monopoly capitalist was ultimately seeking the elimination of space and time in a global system of absolute control:

"In as much as the circuits which capital travels in order to go from one of [its] forms into the other constitute sections of circulation, and these sections are travelled in specific amounts of time (even spatial distance reduces itself to time; the important thing e.g. is not the market's distance in space but the speed — the amount of time — by which it can be reached), by that much the velocity of circulation, the time in which it is accomplished, is a determinant of.. how often capital can be realized in a given time." (2005: p. 538)

Marx develops these ideas on the next page in a famous passage which has come to represent more generally the inherently accelerating and globalizing tendencies of capitalism:

"Thus whilst capital must on the one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and to conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e. to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another." (2005: p. 539)

That made me revisit the essay *Time, Acceleration, and Violence* by Franco "Bifo" Berardi on e-flux where he suggests that what we store in banks is not money but "time":

What do you store in a bank? You store time. But is the money that is stored in the bank my past time—the time that I

have spent in the past? Or does this money give me the possibility of buying a future?

For Berardi like his mentor Felix Guattari the form of financial capitalism in our time is symbolic capital or semiotic, etc., a form that dematerializes money and incorporates it in an absolute global system of liquidity and profit based not of extrinsic products (i.e., commodities like oil, agriculture, steel, etc. – although all these resources are still part of this financial capitalism), but rather on the power of gambling through fast-trades using hedges bets to eliminate the risk factor in a toxic casino system.

As Berardi would state it beginning with Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death* our understanding of the whole financial system is one of falling into indeterminacy, for financial capitalism is essentially the loss of the relationship between time and value. In the very first chapter of *Capital*, Marx explains that value is time, the accumulation of time—time objectified, time that has become things, goods. It is not the time of work, of working in time, that produces value, for it matters little whether one is lazy or efficient. The important determination of value concerns the average time needed to produce a certain good.

Marx in the first chapter of *Capital* had already seen this abstraction of disappearance of labor into abstraction:

With the disappearance of the useful character of the products of labour, the useful character of the kinds of labour embodied in them also disappears; this in turn entails the disappearance of the different concrete forms of labour. They can no longer be distinguished, but are **all together reduced to the same kind of labour, human labour in the abstract.**

Let us now look at the **residue of the products** of labour. There is nothing left of them in each case but the same **phantom-like objectivity**; they are **merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human labour**, i.e. of human labour-power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure. All these things now tell us is that human labour-power has been expended to produce them, human labour is accumulated in them. As crystals of this social substance, which is common to them all, they are values – commodity values.¹

Reading these closely (and I don't have the German...) we see labour is reduced to abstract thought (idealism), or conceptuality; and, framed in an elaborate system of disembodied information in which as he tells it "the kinds of labour embodied in them also disappears". So the actual human animal that performs labour is eliminated from the beginning in the equation for the capitalist, and replaced with statistical and probabilistic mathematical theorems which forever after haunt economics. Yet, as he suggest above we should look at the "residue of the products" of labour. As he suggests, they too have vaporized into a "phantom-like objectivity" as "congealed quantities of homogenous human labour". In other words, the form or substantive register of physical labour is eliminated from the equation and replaced with its mathematical or abstract form: or time-value which has been "accumulated in them". As he'll term it, this abstract labour has become part of a symbolic of "crystals of this social substance" which is common to them all as values – commodity values. So that what is accumulated is not money but *time as value*. So from this moment forward the physical commodity is reduced to its *time-unit*.

As Berardi over a hundred years later will say,

All of this is clear: value is time, capital is value, or accumulated time, and the banks store this accumulated time. Then, all of a sudden, something new happens in the relationship between time, work, and value, and something happens in technology. Work ceases to be the strong, muscular work of industrial production, and begins producing signs—products that are essentially semiotic. In order to establish the average time needed to produce a glass, one simply needs to understand the material labor involved in converting sand into glass, and so forth. But try to decide how much time is needed to produce an idea, a project, a style, a creation, and you find that the production process becomes semiotic, with the relationship between time, work, and value suddenly evaporating, melting into air.

In other words the external commodity that could once be quantized and reduced to its time-unit vanishes in a semiotic economy based not on external commodities, but rather on ideas themselves: a project, a style, a creation, etc., and this cannot be quantized since the time variable is no longer available since it is moving at the speed of light. This is where all our present theories of Speed, Accelerationism, etc. have been trying to reconfigure economics, but have failed so far in so doing. (Unless someone can point to an economist who has done so?)

For Berardi present day financial capitalism uses 'violence' as the measure, saying that from the time of Bretton Woods system, which fixed the relationship between different monies throughout the world onward, the dollar became, "let's say, free, independent, autonomous. And the possibility for a **universal measurement of the amount of time needed to produce a thing or a good was effectively gone**. Of course, this meant that the United States of America would then decide the exchangeability of the dollar, but according to what terms? **The financialization of the economy would use violence in place of measurement**. This relationship is not extemporaneous or casual, but absolutely structural: **there is no financialization without violence, because violence becomes the only means of producing value in the place of a standard.**"

Here Berardi will begin a critique of progressive history or the notion of Progress, saying that we are "accustomed to thinking of time in terms of progress, as a **process of growth and even perfectibility**. The idea of the future was crucial to this modern conception of time, as we find in Marinetti's 1909 Futurist Manifesto, where one finds the essential feature of modern capitalism: an understanding of **time as a process of growing potency and of acceleration.**"

He'll continue with a short history of futurism as the defeminization of culture commenting that the Italian Futurists in speaking about time as acceleration "articulated a modern potency that is also a masculine potency—a masculinization of the perception of time, of the perception of politics, of perception itself, which was a central problem of acceleration in Italian modernity. You cannot understand Italian Fascism without starting from its attempt to **defeminize the culture**." Going on to describe it this way:

Italian Fascism thus marked a crucial point of passage from feminine shame to masculine acceleration, to pride, aggressiveness, war, industrial growth, and so forth. But it remains a search for another perception of time, for a way of forgetting one's own laziness, slowness, and sensitivity by asserting a perception of time in which one is a master—a warrior and builder of industry.

So even here we see capitalism seeking a way to reduce time and space through mastery and androcratic governance, etc.. He'll continue with this short history up to the point that Sid Vicious cried "no future" in 1977: "the future is over—don't think about your future, because you don't have one. In a sense, this cry was the final premonition of the end of the modern age, of the end of industrial capitalism and the beginning of **a new age of total violence**. If capitalism is to go on in the history of mankind, then **the history of mankind must become the place of total violence, because only the violence of competition can decide the value of time**."

We are the end product of this *agon*, this *capitalism as total violence*. Enter Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*:

"...competition is not the same as work. Competition is like crime, like violence, like murder, like rape. Competition equals war. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari say that **fascism is "when a war machine is installed in each hole, in every niche."** And **I would say that an economic regime based on competition is fascism perfected**. But how does this violence arrive in the economic sphere?"

Enter the Infospheric Economy in which semiosis is the base: you need more and more signs, words, information, to buy less and less meaning. Berardi speaks of it as a hyper-accelerationism, the notion of accelerating work time (24/7):

But when the main tool for production ceases to be material labor and becomes **cognitive labor**, acceleration enters another phase, another dimension, because an increase in **semicapitalist productivity** comes essentially from the acceleration of the info-sphere—the environment from which information arrives in your brain.

Here Berardi enters a diagnostic approach reminding us of Marx's notion of crisis in which overproduction in industrial capitalism surpasses demand and leads to partial collapse and withdrawal, an excess workforce is fired, who in turn have less money to buy products, resulting in an overall effect of economic decline. In the sphere of semicapital, however, "overproduction is linked to the relation between the amount of semiotic goods being produced in relation to the amount of **attentive time being disposed of**. You can **accelerate attention by taking amphetamines**, for instance, or using other techniques or drugs that give you the possibility of being more attentive, more productive in the field of attention. **But you know how it ends**."

Capitalists of the 90's realized they'd pushed the limits of this form and saw that the crisis of the Silicon Valley bubble burst needed something else. In a letter to linguist and semiologist Thomas Seboek, Bill Gates wrote that "the digital revolution is all about ... tools to make things easy." This notion of making things easier would lead to the friendly interfaces developed by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak began a dangerous process of making things easy: "if you make things easy, a large majority of people will follow you. In this way, we find the evolution of the internet to be the evolution of a totalitarian system that begins as a channel for research and discovery, for creation and invention, to become essentially a place where things are easy. It is in this way that meaning can be totally forgotten, but information can continue to move." (Berardi)

This notion that what's circulation now is "information" is at the core of the financilization of capital in the digital or cognitive economy. As Berardi explains it:

When more signs buy less meaning, when there is an inflation in meaning, when the info-sphere accelerates and your attention is unable to keep up, what do you need? You need someone who makes things easy for you. It's a problem of time.

Ultimately in our time *time* has collapsed into instantaneous or *semiotic time*: "*The end of modernity arrived with the collapse of the future, as Johnny Rotten signaled. But postmodernism, as far as we can tell, has only produced a techno-linguistic machine permeating every recess of daily life, every space of the social brain.*"

For Berardi we need to reconnect and refeminize our culture, reconnect to our physical substratum, our bodies, the embodied life. "In this situation, we need to reactivate our ability to connect language and desire, or the situation will become extremely bad. If the relationship between the signifier and the signified can no longer be guaranteed by the presence of the body, we lose our relationship to the world."

Yet, as we know the latest addition of capitalism is banking on the elimination of the human worker altogether, replacing her with machines and weak and (eventually) strong AI, Robotics, invasive nanotechnology, biotech enhancement, transhuman,

posthuman perfection and immortality, etc.

Violence instead of crisis as the core of this version of total capitalism. Puts the notion of disaster, or catastrophism at the heart of every aspect of the economy. The point here is the production of mass disasters as a form of violence, the burst bubbles as a way of eliminating waste. As Marx once said,

Once this extreme limit has been reached, the least rise in the price of food, the shortest stoppage of work, the slightest illness, increases the worker's distress and brings him to complete disaster: debts accumulate, credit fails, the most necessary clothes and furniture are pawned, and finally the family asks to be enrolled on the list of paupers.' In fact, in this 'paradise for capitalists', the smallest change in the prices of the most essential means of subsistence is followed by a change in the number of deaths and crimes!²

He would go on to describe catastrophe capitalism, saying that through its very catastrophes, capitalism makes the recognition of variation of labour and hence of the fitness of the worker for the maximum number of different kinds of labour into a question of life and death. This possibility of varying labour must become a general law of social production, and the existing relations must be adapted to permit its realization in practice.³ What he didn't see is that this "monstrosity, the disposable working population held in reserve, in misery, for the changing requirements of capitalist exploitation" would not be replaced as he hoped by a "totally developed individual," but by machines, robots, automated systems both in physical and mental forms at the price of the human altogether.

As Giroux and Evans in their recent *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle* tell us:

The spectacle of violence represents more than the public enactment and witnessing of human violation. It points to a highly mediated **regime of suffering and misery**, which brings together the discursive and the aesthetic such that the performative nature of the imagery functions in a politically contrived way. In the process of occluding and depoliticizing complex narratives of any given situation, it assaults our senses in order to hide things in plain sight. The spectacle works by turning human suffering into a spectacle, framing and editing the realities of violence, and in doing so renders some lives meaningful while dismissing others as disposable. It operates through a hidden structure of politics that colonizes the imagination, denies critical engagement, and preemptively represses alternative narratives. The spectacle harvests and sells our **attention**, while denying us the ability for properly engaged political reflection. It engages agency as a **pedagogical practice** in order to destroy its capacity for **self-determination, autonomy, and self-reflection**. It works precisely at the level of subjectivity by manipulating our desires such that we become cultured to consume and enjoy productions of violence, becoming entertained by the ways in which it is packaged, which divorce domination and suffering from ethical considerations, historical understanding and political contextualization. The spectacle immerses us, encouraging us to experience violence as pleasure such that we become positively invested in its occurrence, while attempting to render us incapable of either challenging the actual atrocities being perpetrated by the same system or steering our collective future in a different direction.⁴

Violent capitalism produces the destruction of the Subject and its resubjection as a wounded and controllable thing that can be manipulated, isolated, and managed. This new form of capital violence spurs on the hate, the fear, the turmoil of disasters, catastrophes, and violence around the world as part of its mission to suborn and enslave the human population of the planet within its regime of suffering. As Kevin Bales in *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* says,

Slavery is a booming business and the number of slaves is increasing. People get rich by using slaves. And when they've finished with their slaves, they just throw these people away. This is the new slavery, which focuses on big profits and cheap lives. It is not about owning people in the traditional sense of the old slavery, but about controlling them completely. People become completely disposable tools for making money.⁵

Here in the U.S.A. corporations like Wal-Mart no longer hire permanent 40-hour a week employees so that they do not have to offer insurance, benefits, etc., instead they offer part-time employment without rights. People who work part-time in jobs can be fired at will without compensation or benefit. We've become overworked and underpaid to the point that most people spend their lives from hand to mouth, month in and month out just to meet the basic needs of subsistence. And for many who have lost all hope the streets have become the menagerie of last resort and death. Other countries are far worse off than this in the Third World where slave labour is actually just sweat shops or sex stalls for meat puppets.

As Saskia Sassen in her expose *Expulsions* remarks we are confronting a formidable problem in our global political economy: the emergence of new logics of expulsion. The past two decades have seen a sharp growth in the number of people, enterprises, and places expelled from the core social and economic orders of our time. This tipping into radical expulsion was enabled by elementary decisions in some cases, but in others by some of our most advanced economic and technical achievements. The notion of expulsions takes us beyond the more familiar idea of growing inequality as a way of capturing the pathologies of today's global capitalism. Further, it brings to the fore the fact that forms of knowledge and intelligence we respect and admire are often at the origin of long transaction chains that can end in simple expulsions.⁶

Frederic Lordon in his new book *Willing Slaves Of Capital: Spinoza And Marx On Desire* speaks of domination and consent, the (conceptual) terrain of capitalist domination remains open. Asking how can one make sense of this concept – setting aside the cases where employees are downright (and actively) terrorised – when many employees appear to do more than merely adapt to their job, find little to complain about in it, and at times appear to derive real satisfaction from it? But making the dominated happy so that they forget their domination is one of the oldest and most effective ruses of the art of ruling. Under the impact of the requirements of its new productive forms, and helped by the growing sophistication of its practices of governmentality, capitalism is on the road to achieving a domination that no longer shows the familiar face of the naked iron yoke.⁷

This notion of our hedonist society of decadent capitalism in which the middle-tier and upper echelons are captured by desires, controlled through happiness and therapy, etc. is prevalent. Obviously only at that level, because the bottom tier, the poor and outcast still live in suffering and misery, part-time jobs, drug induced escapism in bars or cocaine/heroin hives, etc.. In fact Lordon will describe the hostility of this new class structure of the Have's against the Have-Not's as one of reserving for one's self the opportunities for social joy and keeping away (the others) as social domination's most characteristic gestures. But in order to be fully successful, "the distributive operation of domination must meet an additional requirement; it must reserve certain objects of desire to the dominators, and make the dominated recognise them as desirable, but with a decisive provision: desirable in general, but not for them." (Lordon, p. 110)

Zygmunt Bauman in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* reminds us that throughout the era of modernity, the nation-state has claimed the right to preside over the distinction between order and chaos, law and lawlessness, citizen and homo sacer, belonging and exclusion, useful (= legitimate) product and waste. 'All well-meaning chatter notwithstanding', sifting out, segregating and disposing of the waste of order-building combined into the main preoccupation and metafunction of the state, as well as providing the foundation for its claims to authority.⁸

Yet, in our time we are seeing mass migrations from around the globe that are opening up the spaces of capital violence within the once sacrosanct territories and sovereign zones to the outside, to the excluded. A new tactic of violence to spur on hate, ethnic and social violence, to stir the pot and bring about world-wide civil war. Causes of exclusion may be different, but for those on the receiving end the results feel much the same. Faced with the daunting task of gaining the means of biological survival while stripped of the self-confidence and self-esteem needed to sustain their social survival, they have no reason to contemplate and savour the subtle distinctions between suffering by design and misery by default. They may well be excused for feeling rejected, being incensed and indignant, breathing vengeance and harbouring revenge – though having learned the futility of resistance and surrendered to the verdict of their own inferiority they could hardly find a way to recast all such sentiments into effective action. Whether by an explicit sentence or by an implied though never officially published verdict, they have become superfluous, unnecessary, unneeded and unwanted, and their reactions, off the mark or absent, render the censure a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Bauman, p. 40)

This is subtractive capitalism at its best. Ultimately this is Capital Eliminativism, the subtraction of superfluous and unnecessary, unneeded and unwanted humanity from the present and future system of violent capitalism. Even as the world implodes into a the new forms of Infospheric socialization in which the new elite classes of the financiers and the cognitariat shift into cosmopolitan hedonism, the rest of the world sits outside the gates of the capitalist imaginary feeding on the exclusionary practices of zombie capitalism. Faced with the financial crisis, some economic commentators began to talk of "zombie banks"– financial institutions that were in an "undead state" and incapable of fulfilling any positive function but a threat to everything else. What they do not realize is that twenty-first century capitalism as a whole is a zombie system, seemingly dead when it comes to achieving human goals. Instead it is moving in a non-space, a zone of speed without a future: a savage capitalism feeding off its own imaginary.

In the so called postmodern era philosopher's of the "linguistic turn" as well as those media critics of the visual cultures – from Situationists to Baudrillard developed the shadow side of this transformation as a surface phenomenalism of image and discursive practices. Yet, as many of us know this led only to a deeper malaise, a critique without solution, an endless diagnosis of the decadent structures of what Virilio would term the "Dromosphere", in which time-space compression is an essential facet of contemporary life: "Today we are entering a space which is speed-space ... This new other time is that of electronic transmission, of high-tech machines, and therefore, man is present in this sort of time, not via his physical presence, but via programming" (qtd. in *Decron* 71 [6]). Virilio also uses the term *dromology* to describe "speed-space" as the notion that we are living in the Age of Total Emergency: "The violence of speed has become the location and the law, the world's destiny and its destination." (The State of Emergency, 167)⁹

Giorgio Agamben will tell us of this State of Emergency: "The state of emergency is precisely that space in which Schmitt attempts to comprehend and incorporate into the thesis that there is a pure violence existing outside of the law. For Schmitt, there is no such thing as pure violence, there is no violence absolutely exterior to the nomos, because revolutionary violence, once the state of emergency is established, it always finds itself included in the law. The state of emergency is thus the means invented by Schmitt to respond to Benjamin's thesis that there is a pure violence."¹⁰ As Žižek will affirm: "Evil is not simply excluded in this closed utopian space-it is transformed into a mythic threat with which the community establishes a temporary truce and against which it has to maintain a permanent state of emergency."¹¹

1. Marx, Karl (2004-02-05). Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: A Critique of Political Economy v. 1 (Classics) (Kindle Locations 2124-2130). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.
2. Marx, Karl (2004-02-05). Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: A Critique of Political Economy v. 1 (Classics) (Kindle Locations 11987-11988). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.
3. Marx, Karl (2004-02-05). Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: A Critique of Political Economy v. 1 (Classics) (Kindle Locations 8933-8939). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.
4. Giroux, Henry A.; Evans, Brad (2015-06-22). Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle (City Lights Open Media) (Kindle Locations 624-636). City Lights Publishers. Kindle Edition.
5. Bales, Kevin (2012-04-23). Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy (p. 4). University of California Press. Kindle Edition.
6. Sassen, Saskia (2014-05-05). Expulsions (Kindle Locations 39-44). Harvard University Press. Kindle Edition.
7. Lordon, Frederic (2014-06-03). Willing Slaves Of Capital: Spinoza And Marx On Desire . Verso Books. Kindle Edition.
8. Bauman, Zygmunt (2013-05-06). Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts (p. 33). Wiley. Kindle Edition.
9. Paul Virilio. Speed and Politics. (semiotext(e), 2006)
10. Giorgio Agamben. "The State of Emergency." Universite Paris VII, Denis-Diderot. Lecture given at the Centre Roland-Barthes. 2002. English.
11. Zizek, Slavoj (2008-07-22). Violence (BIG IDEAS//small books) (p. 26). Picador. Kindle Edition.

taken from dark ecologies

Foto: Bernhard Weber

← PREVIOUS NEXT →

META

CONTACT

FORCE-INC/MILLE PLATEAUX

IMPRESSUM

DATENSCHUTZERKLÄRUNG

TAXONOMY

CATEGORIES

TAGS

AUTHORS

ALL INPUT

SOCIAL

FACEBOOK

INSTAGRAM

TWITTER